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“BLACK COAT” SCOTTISH SPIES: CLERICAL INFORMERS IN 1820

John Gardner

This essay is about the existence of spies in Scotland in 1820. There is evidence that there were informers at work, and that contemporary literature identified some of the Scottish clergy as government agents. This essay reviews modern historical commentary on the use of spies during the period of the risings, and then turns to poetry from the period by Janet Hamilton and Alexander Rodger that insists that spies were used, including clergymen. Finally, I examine evidence of clerical espionage from the National Archives at Kew.

While it has been established that spies and informers were at work during the Cato Street Conspiracy in London, there are still conflicting views on the use of spies around the time of the risings in Scotland.¹ Underlying the disputes is how much to trust the influential early account by Peter Mackenzie in his *An Exposure of the Spy System Pursued in Glasgow* (1835).² F. K. Donnelly distinguishes two ways of interpreting the 1820 Scottish: first, “the nationalist view asserts that the general rising in Scotland was a secessionist or separatist movement of Celtic liberation,” while, second, “the rising is thought to have been triggered by the activities of ‘agents provocateurs’ working on behalf of the central government in London.”³ Donnelly states that “the later claim is based on the writings of one Peter Mackenzie whose views are not borne out by the official records of either the Home Office or the Scottish authorities” (*ibid.*). I will come back to those records. To support his view, Donnelly cites a brilliant and

¹ On the wider issue of spies in 1820, cf. John Gardner, “Preventing Revolution: Cato Street, Bonnymuir and Cathkin,” *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 39 (2013): 162-182; online at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol39/iss1/14/>.

² Peter Mackenzie, *An Exposure of the Spy System Pursued in Glasgow, During the Years 1816-17-18-19 and 20, with copies of the Original Letters of Andrew Hardie* (Glasgow: Muir, Gowans, 1833).

³ F. K. Donnelly, “The Scottish Rising of 1820: A Re-Interpretation,” *International Review of Scottish Studies*, 6 (1976), 27-37 (27): <https://www.irss.uoguelph.ca/index.php/irss/article/view/675/1115>.

influential PhD thesis by William Roach, saying Roach has “completely discredited Mackenzie as a reliable chronicler of these events and at the same time exonerated Alexander Richmond, the Glasgow weaver accused of being a government ‘agent provocateur’” (*ibid.*). Roach had allowed that “a spy system might have been organised by Kirkman Finlay and James Reddie,” and that Finlay, an MP, and Reddie, Town Clerk of Glasgow, employed Richmond as one of their “agents or ‘spies’ ... to provide them with information about the secret radical conspirators” in 1816.⁴ Richmond is supposed to have spied for only three months, but Mackenzie says he continued through until 1820. Richmond admitted that in 1816-17 he had been a spy but denied that he had been involved in the 1820 rebellions. Mackenzie asserts at the outset of his book that:

We are thoroughly convinced that Andrew Hardie and his unfortunate companions were the victims of *blood-thirsty scoundrels*, better known by the name of *spies*, who at that time infested this country, to the scandal, to the everlasting disgrace of its then government, by whom they were encouraged and protected.⁵

Mackenzie refers to Hardie, who along with Baird was executed in Stirling on 8 September 1820 for High Treason, as was James Wilson in Glasgow on 30 August and the five Cato Street conspirators on 1 May. Gordon Pentland comments that “Mackenzie sought to convey an interpretation of the post-war radicals as having been seduced into violence by spies and agents-provocateurs.”⁶ In Roach’s opinion, “it is probably wise to reject everything that MacKenzie wrote except when ... he had firsthand knowledge of events” (Roach, xii). Roach rejects the use of spies during the rising writing: “Hardie, Baird and Wilson were the victims not of a spy system but of inefficiency and folly” (Roach, 249). While stating that “belief that [the insurrection] was simply the work of *agents provocateurs* ... has been soundly refuted and finds no substantial evidence in its support,” Christopher Whatley nonetheless sees a spy system of sorts in existence:

Spies and informers appointed on the instruction of the Lord Advocate, Sir William Rae, and Lord Sidmouth ensured that the

⁴ William N. Roach, “Radical Reform Movements in Scotland from 1815 to 1822 with Particular Reference to Events in the West of Scotland” (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 1970), xii, vii.

⁵ Mackenzie, *Exposure of the Spy System*, 3.

⁶ Gordon Pentland, “Scotland and the Creation of a National Reform Movement, 1830-1832,” *The Historical Journal*, 48: 4 (2005), 999-1023 (1015).

authorities were invariably one step ahead of those radicals who were plotting insurrection.⁷

Alistair Goldsmith is convinced that Richmond was a spy, writing:

Alexander Richmond, known as the “Parliamentary agent,” and his coterie in Glasgow infiltrated the weavers’ unions from 1819 and their activities led to several prosecutions. After he was exposed in 1834 the case was reviewed at the instigation of the Court of Exchequer. It became clear that Richmond had reported directly to Lords Sidmouth and Castlereagh on the political situation in the city.⁸

Bernard Porter writes that “Spies were certainly involved in the whole affair,” and quotes Captain James Mitchell who wrote to Lord Sidmouth in March 1820 that

if some plan were conceived by which the disaffected could be lured out of their lairs—being made to think that the day of ‘liberty’ had come—we would catch them abroad and undefended.⁹

Porter asserts that “Sidmouth’s spy system ... was highly decentralized,” with the spies being recruited “by local law men,” or else they “more or less recruited themselves” (Porter, 90-91). Kenny MacAskill writes that “the authorities must have still known that something was being planned,” but holds back from having spies doing the organizing.¹⁰ MacAskill thinks it likely that “the intentions of the rebels were genuine and that spies had infiltrated the group and had provided misleading information” (MacAskill, 284). In summary, there is uncertainty whether spies were used at all, and if they were, to what extent, and who they were?

If modern historians are unsure about the use of informers, then some literature of the period is certain that spies were active in Scotland in 1820. Janet Hamilton (1795-1867), who in 1820 was the twenty-five-year old wife of a shoemaker in Langloan, Lanarkshire, saw the story of the Scottish radicals as a play written by others, memorably describing those involved “in this miserable drama” as deluded by operators, including “government spies,” who “moved the wires that made the poor puppets

⁷ Christopher A. Whatley, *Scottish Society 1707-1830: Beyond Jacobitism, Towards Industrialisation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 309, 318.

⁸ Alexander Goldsmith, “Confederates on the Clyde,” *History Today*, 48:8, (August 1998), 45-50 (45).

⁹ Bernard Porter, *Plots and Paranoia: A History of Political Espionage in Britain 1790-1988* (London: Routledge, 1992), 59.

¹⁰ Kenny MacAskill, *Radical Scotland: Uncovering Scotland’s Radical History from the French revolutionary Era to the 1820 Rising* (London: Biteback, 2020), 276.

dance.”¹¹ Hamilton’s account of radicals in Airdrie emphasizes how impossible it would have been for radicals to hide their activities from others. Instead they needed to show themselves carrying out dangerous activities to convince and threaten others in their community:

there was Will Lightbody, the pulicate weaver, and his son, busy every night with a couple of moulds casting bullets, and compounding gunpowder of wood-charcoal, saltpeter, and Sulphur, and Jemmy Gardner of that ilk, also laboring in that vocation.... it was generally understood that a rising would take place in the spring of 1820; and we lived in a state of continual excitement, for the Radicals made no secret of their intentions to take revenge on those who did not join them.¹²

The fact that they did not get arrested and executed also shows the tightness of the town. However, Hamilton points out that they did not attain their former standing when the rising failed. Hamilton helps confirm that James Wilson was selected as a scapegoat when he was executed for High Treason, as he did much less than the other characters named in this account. Hamilton’s verse attests to the presence of spies in Airdrie in 1820:

She told him he must not come near
To ’tend the funeral—there was fear;
For spies were placed, and watch was set,
Assured the rebel they would get.¹³

Alexander Rodger’s poetry also insists that there were informers at work in Scotland. In 1819, Rodger (1784-1845), a weaver from Bridgeton, had written for the short-lived radical newspaper *The Spirit of the Union*. He is now perhaps best known for his devastating put down of Sir Walter Scott and the classes who would fawn over George IV on his visit to Scotland in 1822:

Tell him he is great and good,
And come o’ Scottish royal blood,—
To your hunkers—lick his fud.¹⁴

This brilliantly colloquial jab at the royal “lick-fud bailie core” (25) gets right to the heart of a class system in Scotland. Rodger’s song “Shonny

¹¹ Janet Hamilton, *Poems of Purpose and Sketches in Prose of Scottish Peasant Life and Character in Auld Langsyne* (Glasgow: Murray, 1865), 240

¹² *Poems of Purpose*, 232-233. “Pulicate” was a kind of gingham cloth, named for the region of India from which the cotton originally came.

¹³ Janet Hamilton, “Real Incident of the Persecuting Times in Scotland,” *Poems, Essays and Sketches* (Glasgow: MacLehose, 1870), 130.

¹⁴ Alexander Rodger, “Sawney, Now the King’s Come” [1822], *Stray Leaves from the Portfolios of Alisander the Seer, Andrew Whaup, and Humphrey Henkeckle* (Glasgow: Rattray, 1842), 60-61.

Cammel; or the Turn-Coat Priest,” satirizes a socially-ambitious minister who exhorts his congregation to

Now come unto me, all ye loyal and true,
And I will instruct you in what you must do,
Wi' my black coat, and gravat sae white.
Renounce all connection with Radical knaves,—
Bow down to Lord Sidmouth,—be his willing slaves;
And listen to me, with devotion and awe,
While I, from this high place, promulgate his law,
In my black coat, and gravat sae white.

His law, then, is this, that ye spend not your cash
In purchasing wicked and blasphemous trash
Against black coats, and gravats sae white.
The “Spirit of the Union” no more you must read,
For it is the *spirit of the devil* indeed;
And its publisher ought to be whippit through—
For publishing *truths* unbecoming to tell,
About black coats, and gravats sae white.

But depart ye from me, all ye Radical crew,
With you I will henceforth have nothing to do,
In my black coat, and gravat sae white.
Your breath is rank poison—your tongues are sharp stings,
Directing your venom at priests and at kings;
You're foes to the Kirk, as you're foes to the State,
And therefore ye merit the rancour and hate
Of each black coat, and gravat sae white.¹⁵

In his song “Advice to the Priest-Ridden,” the opening poem in his first book, *Scotch Poetry* (1821), Rodger castigates “black coats,” verse by verse through a roster of clerical villains.¹⁶ To suggest the sexual hypocrisy of the clergy, Rodger sets his song to “The Black Joke,” a tune used by Robert Burns for his sexually-explicit song “My girl she’s airy, she’s buxom and gay.”¹⁷ Rodgers spells this theme out in one of the verses:

And *Johnny M'Greed* , how he lashes at them
Wha gang the grey gate that brings lasses to shame,
Wi' his black coat, &c.
For into *temptation* himsel' is ne'er led ,
But *willingly* enters her *net* when 'tis *spread*;
And when he is caught in her *strait kittle mesh* ,

¹⁵ Alexander Rodger, “Shonny Cammel; or, the Turn-Coat Priest” [1819], *Stray Leaves*, 61-62.

¹⁶ Alexander Rodger, *Scotch Poetry* (London: Richard Carlile, 1821), 1-4.

¹⁷ Robert Burns, *Poems and Songs*, ed. James Kinsley, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), I: 60.

He greets and cries out, “O! how weak is the *flesh*,”
Wi’ his black coat, &c.

But Rodger’s chief accusation is of political collusion. Another portrait makes explicit clerical support for the use of military force in suppressing popular unrest:

Johnny Bishop, the kind, the humane, the beloved,
Wi’ the cries o’ the starving is now so much moved,
Wi’ his black coat, &c.
That when they look up to him, asking for bread,
He gives not a *stone*, but provides for them—*lead*;
If they ask for a *fish*, not a serpent he’ll grant,
While a three-edged *steel* can relieve every want,
Wi’ his black coat, &c.

A second political target is James Lapslie (1754-1824), minister of Campsie, who had spoken against Thomas Muir in 1792:

There’s pensioner *Jamie*, Corruption’s chief tool,
Whase tears flow as freely as whiskey at yule,
Wi’ his black coat, &c.
So keenly he feels for the suffering poor,
That he’d willingly do what he did for *Tom Muir*;
To get them sent off to a far better state,
By starving or hanging them out o’ the gate,
Wi’ his black coat, &c.

Rodger’s portrait of Lapslie, “the dreichest of the dreich,” is corroborated by doggerel reported elsewhere:

My name is Jamie Lapslie,
I preach, and I pray
And as an informer,
Expect a good pay.¹⁸

When challenged by one of Muir’s radical supporters, Lapslie was reported to have thrown off his clerical garb to fight physically with a radical supporter of Muir.¹⁹ After the trial, in 1793, he was appointed to a sinecure giving him £50 a year for preaching one sermon.²⁰

Rodger does not say all clergymen are bad, “But oh! these exceptions, how trifling, how few, / Compared wi’ the mass who have interest in view.” His song, he says, gives

... but a sample of maist o’ the crew,
Wha laugh in their sleeve while they’re hoodwinking you,
Wi’ their black coats, &c.

¹⁸ John Cameron, *The Parish of Campsie* (Kirkintilloch: MacLeod, 1892), 11; for a more positive view of Lapslie as orator, cf. J.G. Lockhart, *Peter’s Letters to his Kinsfolk* (Edinburgh: Blacwood, 1819), III: 61-62.

¹⁹ Cameron, 11-12; John Kay, *A Series of Original Portraits and Caricature Etchings* (Edinburgh, Paton, Carver and Gilder, 1838), 114.

²⁰ Cameron, 11.

The gospel they preach is the gospel of *Pitt*,
 Which teaches that mankind are born to submit,
 And patiently bend to the haughty behests
 Of legalized robbers, and humbugging priests,
 Wi' their black coats, &c.

Rodger was not alone in accusing the clergy of being government agents. Following Peterloo, a spy for Scotland's Lord Advocate wrote that radicals "hold the clergy as the most active tools of the Government in oppressing the people."²¹ Evidence of informers might be missing from the Scottish archives, but it is there in the National Archives at Kew, and it validates contemporary mistrust of the clergy. John Monteath, a Church of Scotland minister from the manse of the United Parishes of Houston and Killallan in Renfrewshire, wrote to Sidmouth on 6 January 1820 that "Blasphemous Publications ... have done a world of mischief among mechanics, and weavers, and cotton spinners."²² On 2 March 1820, Monteath refers to the Cato Street conspiracy, stating this "was to be the signal for all those desperate men who approved of it, even in the remotest villages, in the counties of Lanark, Renfrew, and Ayr, to rise in a mass, and unite in deeds of violence."²³ On 31 March, Monteath warns Sidmouth of "an intended rising tomorrow." The next night an "Address to the Inhabitants of Great Britain & Ireland" appeared pasted to walls within a twenty-mile radius around Glasgow, purporting to be from "the Committee of Organization for forming a Provisional Government."²⁴ This spurred on the risings and consequently the execution of Wilson, Baird and Hardie for High Treason.²⁵

In Glasgow, Andrew Scott, the Roman Catholic priest responsible for building St. Andrew's Cathedral (1816), was sending extensive reports directly to the Home Office in London. Amongst these reports is an eight-page document from 22 September 1820 where Scott informs the authorities that

Some hundreds of the malcontents are already in possession of pistols, a number of pikes.... I have my information from those who saw the pistols and who saw the pike-heads. The pike-heads were made in the Caltown of Glasgow by a Smith.

²¹ Lord Advocate to Sidmouth 19 September 1819, The National Archives, HO 102.30, f.621-622.

²² TNA, HO 130/32, f.36.

²³ TNA, HO 130/32, f.224.

²⁴ TNA, HO 130/32, f. 297.

²⁵ On this, see also John Gardner, "Preventing Revolution: Cato Street, Bonnymuir and Cathkin," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 39 (2013): 162-182; online at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol39/iss1/14/>.

Contacting Sidmouth directly, Scott perhaps explains why historians have not found spy reports in Scottish archives—the fear of exposure: “to drag me before an open court of justice would ruin my character, prevent me from ever receiving any information and expose me to be murdered.”²⁶ If Scott could get money, he:

would secure the affections and loyalty of at least twenty thousand able bodied men in the Counties alone of Lanark, Renfrew and Ayr. You would do more, you would convert almost every man of them into agents of Government under the influence of their pastors.... it would be impossible that any conspiracy could be formed without coming to the knowledge of some of them, and if Government was to assist them out of Secret-Service money to pay the debt of their chapels, which in the present distressed times, they are unable to pay themselves, I am certain that I could prevail upon them to give me private information of every thing that was going on.²⁷

Scott recruits himself as a “Secret-Service” agent deserving of pay, a “black coat” spy. While there is more of this material at the National Archives, the Home Office documents I have cited serve to confirm three things:

1. there were indeed spies and informers working around the Scottish rebellions of 1820;
2. informers avoided the Scottish authorities in case they were exposed and instead went direct to London with their information; and
3. Rodger’s and Hamilton’s assertions that spies were at work were accurate, and their writings contain reliable historical documentary accounts. Furthermore, Rodger’s mistrust of the “black coats” is justifiable given the evidence at Kew.

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²⁶ TNA, HO 130/32, f. 649-652.

²⁷ TNA, HO 130/32, f. 652.